CHAPTER II

MARGARET DRABBLE AND THE GREAT TRADITION

This chapter undertakes the somewhat uneasy task of relating Drabble to the British novelistic tradition. It is a problematic task because of her declared preference for belonging to a dying tradition rather than the new which she distrusts. At the same time she insists on being a product of her own times and preoccupied with concerns which were unknown to the novelists of the earlier tradition. What ostensibly mystifies the matters further is the narrative experimentation and innovations in her later fiction which defy the woolly generalizations some of the Drabble critics and reviewers have made about her fiction in spite of remaining uneasy about the form of her novels.

However, as will be clear in the forthcoming discussion, the form of Drabble's novels is not the result of her unquestioned and blindfolded acceptance of Victorian view of reality with the accompanying novelistic conventions and techniques or of the nostalgia 'for the riches of
the past. It is actually a working back to a reconstituted realism, contained in the Great Tradition, in which Drabble begins with modernism and subjects it to a critique that is profound and contemporary. At the same time she is working her way out of the crisis postmodernism presents, to affirm and reflect a real world which is 'out there' with some kind of underlying cosmic order. For Drabble's work has always been engaged in an exploration of the 'relationship between coincidence and plan? While she has not yet surrendered the hope that a sufficiently cosmic viewpoint would yield intelligible patterns in the events of human life, she has also become increasingly sceptical about that hope in her later fiction. Since she is still engaged in this exploration, her fiction defies any final judgement in this regard.

But to show the crucial differences between her novels and the Victorian tradition, it is necessary to examine the nineteenth-century view of reality that informed the Victorian novel in contrast to both the modernist view of reality that led to the disintegrated vision of the 'major moderns' and the postmodernist vision of reality
which carries modernist assumptions to extremes in its implicit separation of individual and society into mutually exclusive monads. This examination will enable us to place Margaret Drabble in the great tradition of English novel.

In spite of being a transitional period, nineteenth century had a markedly cohesive quality about it. A look at Victorian literary and intellectual culture shows that there is a real sense of functioning close to the centre of society and a sense of responsibility in the novelist for its total texture. There is what David Daiches calls an implicit agreement between the novelist and the reader about what is "significant in human experience" and therefore, what the novelist must select out of the amorphous and inchoate chunk of human experience. The consensus on 'selection and significance' did not hamper the novelist's critical attitude to the Victorian society. The novelist persistently possessed a relative centrality and influence, a conviction

that he could up to a point command direction and purposes of the national culture in a spirit which was absent in other countries and even in the poets of England barring Tennyson. He is part of that sense of community in progress which controlled the limits of doubt and dissent. Since there had been no models of radical constitutional or religious change in the past, the nineteenth century novelist thought the prospect of change was less desirable and even less conceivable because a total change is always brought about on the debris of the past models and the destruction of much which is invaluable for the cohesion of society. It was largely a logocentric society which elevates the hand that writes. This explains the great esteem in which the major novelists were held. Victorian culture, in a certain sense resembled the rich Renaissance artistic period in which dissent and criticism flowed in and out of the centre. It was replete with profound divisions and dissent but not to the point of producing unfathomable gaps or feeling of cultural alienation or solipsism or difficulty in the very act of making a meaning out of art - whether novelistic or poetic. The most
glaring manifestation of this agreement on the pre-existent reality is the 'realism' of the Victorian novel. There was no discrepancy between internal and external or between moral and intellectual development. 'The correlation of observable action and inaction was taken for granted.' In short, society was taken for granted. "Men lived in a social and economic world which was real." In spite of being conscious of the Victorian crisis in values, the novelist still felt to play a responsible role in maintaining the status quo of surface reality. Broadly speaking, the Victorian novel is in line with Jane Austen as Scott suggested when he praised Emma for exemplifying

"The art of copying from nature as she really exists in the common walks of life, and presenting to the reader, instead of the splendid scenes of an imaginary world, a correct and striking representation of that which is daily taking place around him."  

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Daiches, p.2.  

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The stress on the representation of recognizable life in Thackeray, Trollope, Mrs Gaskell and George Eliot is too obvious. Dickens in spite of using melodrama and coincidence more than others, was wedded to a common ethical structure. This shared sense of experience also explains the custom of direct address in the Victorian novels. Once the novelist senses a failure of response in the readers, this kind of ending disappears and the Victorian shared view of the world and the reality. Among the poets only Tennyson was able to contain the doubts about Christian view of life by teaching men the need of the 'Ideal.' However, writers of the closing decades of the century did not have the dogmatic confidence that the ideal was an entity universally recognizable.

The Victorian period was committed to economic growth, social reform and intellectual expansion, which gradually took the English society in the direction of urbanization, technologization, secularization, and the social melting-pot. The intellectual expansion opened the flood-gates of new ideas, concepts and postulates holding out threats to all established institutions and beliefs. This afflicted the sensitive elite who betray the unease while
conducting a cultural reappraisal to be able to reach out to new ideas and modes in the later decades of the century. This is a period of both aestheticism and a new realism.

In France this had already been in vogue. For neither Baudelaire nor Flaubert conformed to the bourgeois conception of morality and both were acutely conscious of their alienation.

In England, consistent with its conservative temper, the reaction started late with the Pre-Raphaelitism of Rossetti and Swinburne, pejoratively called by some 'The Fleshly School of Poetry.'

The greatest assault on the shared view of reality and the ethical orientation of literature came from Walter Pater while justifying Aestheticism in the conclusion of The Renaissance in 1873. For Pater the artist should help bring about "a quickened, multiplied consciousness through his creation of beautiful works." Oscar Wilde subverted the whole Victorian position in The Decay of Lying in 1890. In

4  Faulkner,
Quoted in Modernism, p.4.
this way the moral fervour and the sense of duty to society on the part of the artist was diffused in the ironies and paradoxes of the nineties.

The new temper of novel in particular, in these decades, is the off-shoot of a growing deterministic world view and of a populist revaluation. The predominant note of many novelists, like Hardy, is a sense of powerlessness before and lack of access to the process. The study of biology, in particular, the theories that sought to explain biological evolution made the Victorian age the most critical and self-analytical of all ages, liberated the thought of the individual as never before and weakened the force of tradition. It initiated the sensitive elite into mysteries and experiences unknown to their predecessors. Darwin's theory in particular had a devastating effect on belief in the divine order of the universe. In vehemently attacking the divine origin of man, it questioned man's centrality in the universe by dislodging him from the vice-regal status of God on earth. This seems to be the most significant factor for the discursive mode in the late nineteenth
century and the growing fragmentation of an established culture, and the growth of ethical relativism and the loss of religious sense to the English novel. This was coupled with new speculations in sociological, historical and in particular psychological fields which led to the breakdown of old myths, traditions and the shared sense of reality in the early twentieth century and destroyed the basis of the 'Ideal self' which is the invisible source of ethical orientation of culture in general and literature in particular.

Arnold was among the first intellectuals to be bothered by 'mind in dialogue with itself' and the world a place where there is 'everything to endure and nothing to do' because the basis of the Ideal self had been eroded with which he could dramatize his response. This is the tradition that Eliot inherited. It is perhaps the awareness of this predicament that led to Hardy's radically different realism and to his announcement that "my sober opinion of the cause of Things . . . is neither moral nor immoral but unmoral." Eliot attacked

Hardy for 'self-expression' uncurbed by any submission to objective beliefs and strove to expunge the taint of personality from his writings. His was an attempt to overcome the sense of dissolution of shared culture in an atmosphere of change, plurality and discontinuity on all sides which led to a semantic vacuum in both the poetry and the novel.

Related to the breakdown of the common background of religious belief was the birth of new ideas in ethics and psychology, and the new concept of time, which gradually led to a radical redefinition of both the nature and function of fiction, and the consequent expansion and experimentation in the English novel. Time was conceived of as a continuous flow rather than as a series of separate points independently enunciated in France and America by Hendri Bergson and William James respectively. James gave the idea of the continuity of consciousness in relation to time as a continuous flow. This had a shattering effect on the dogmatic confidence in the old plot which shows characters progressing in a precise chronological sequence. It implicitly laid emphasis on such a
narrative 'texture' which moves back and forth and up and down in the stream of consciousness with a "new freedom to try to capture the sense of time as it actually operates in the human awareness of it." The new concept of consciousness was derived from the works of Freud and Jung which laid emphasis on the plurality of consciousness, the ever-presence in the given consciousness of the sum total of personal experiences and perhaps the sum total of what the race has experienced.

The preoccupation with individual consciousness, its ever increasing plurality, its capacity to hoard up the entire past of the individual, influencing his present actions and reactions; the awareness of time as a continuum afflicting human consciousness, together with the breakdown of common beliefs led to the disintegrated vision of the society and the emphasis on the individual's loneliness and the resultant solipsism. Man emerges not only to be the prisoner of his own private consciousness but to him the world is only what he imagines it. This in a particular sense could be traced back to Descartes'
radical assertion: 'I think, therefore, I am.'

Society is in this sense, unreal. Its institutions, of necessity, falsify the truth about the individual self. Its available means of communication can only distort the truth of individual's experiences. Loneliness emerges to be a necessary condition of man. Yet the need to communicate and to connect the self with the other, to transcend loneliness is acutely felt. But the problems of doing so were enormous simply because the concord between the moral world and the world of things, between inner and outer reality, between man and nature was felt to have withered away. The novelist could either concentrate on the outer reality or he could turn to the world of inner consciousness but could not integrate the two. He had to make artistic forms and practices more consonant with his perceived experience. He had to devise ways of presenting the different and ever-present levels of consciousness which will automatically take him down the stream to know the source of the byways and the highways. This led to the creation of a fictional technique called the 'stream of consciousness' technique.
The alternative for the poet or the novelist was to write out of his own personal culture, through the separate creative self that Yeats both celebrates and bemoans. The novelist felt forced to create and to show, not to interpret; to act as the critic and the maker of his own tradition; to reinvent the world and substantiate aesthetic values within it, through energies appropriate to art rather than ethics. Culture became a discontinuous sequence. Even when the artist appeals to tradition, he appeals to a discontinuous tradition. Eliot's tradition must be 'sought by great labour.' Modernity in literature, in short, tends to involve a complete break with culture as a communal bond. Literature which was a storehouse of values started to talk of its own failure because it was shaken to its roots by the radical redisposition of values. There is a recurrent feeling of disintegration of all traditional, paradigmatic forms. The world seemed to have let loose its own disorder.

Things fall apart;
/The centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, said Yeats, or again

The woods of Arcady are dead
And over is their antique joy ...  
Of old the world on dreaming fed,
Grey truth is now her painted toy...  

Yeats struggled to achieve the 'Unity of Being' by putting the 'antithetical self' against a 'Body of Fate' and succeeded in coming out of the 'Celtic Twilight' of his earlier days. Eliot persistently strove to achieve unity in his poetry but having failed in his earlier experimental poetry to achieve it, realised that the real organic unity could be attained only by connecting oneself with a Greater self and hence he was converted to Christianity.

But the novelists, on the whole, remained locked within their efforts to establish contact with the outer world. In seeking transcendence


from historicism and a positivistic view of human progress, the major moderns turned to the transcendence of art, the personally achieved image, the epiphany, the ideal of metamorphosis. In trying to achieve the hard objective, aesthetic wholeness and energy of the autonomous works of art, in contrast to the softness and moralism of the mid-nineteenth century novel, the novelist sought to objectify the private world of culture but remained thwarted within the effort, because of the felt unreality of the external world.

In the major figures of modern literature we see a disruption and abandonment of tradition that had been in development over five centuries. Most critics agree that the new movement brought only artistic disorder. The new style was rooted in its refusal to make objective statements about reality and made "the metaphor its essential res poetica." It explains the various responses to the reality by the

major moderns and the consequent individual visions of the later James, Conrad, E.M. Forster, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf. Though there was another group of writers who went on more or less representing the surface reality like Bennett, Wells, Galsworthy whom Virginia Woolf calls 'materialists!' In her view their work never really captured the inward vision (which is, in effect, destructive of all social forms and institutions), She remarks:

Whether we call it life of spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide.

Woolf, Joyce and others are concerned with the inner crisis of sensibility and large problems of form and language as they are doubtful about the objective validity of their impressions.

In short, the modern novelist is pushed into a context where the consensus on "selection and

significance is no longer felt to exist, can no longer be depended upon.\footnote{Daiches, p. 5.} The shock provided by the First World War to all the established ideas, beliefs and values and the revelation of its 'horrors and futility' completed the process of the disintegration of a shared view of reality - the world and the self. It was the sensitive elite who were terribly shaken and who believed with Virginia Woolf that they could no longer take it for granted that their impressions held good for others; they remained locked within the multilog of the self. The carving out of individual cultures and isolating and perfecting of individual visions without any allegiance to society meant that the modern period chose the inner world of subjective imaginings and 'vision' as opposed to the harsh realities of the outer world of capitalist industrialized society. The import of the belief that the inner world is the only real one is that the external world is only what I imagine it to be - which is the essence of solipsism. Another inference that could be drawn from this position is that action is not only not necessary, it is impossible. Alfred Prufrock's too intense consciousness keeps
him trapped inside himself and he can do nothing else but wonder to himself if he dare disturb the universe by acting, by rolling his trousers.

The moderns choose interiority as the society becomes for them the supreme illusion and the greatest evil. To admit the reality of the external world is to find oneself capable of action and to avoid the denial of the reality of the other person is to assert the value of society. Once the reality of another individual is admitted, the inevitable consequence is the interplay between the inner and the outer. The essence of the modern period is that it is expressly against society and for alienation. This, in effect, means that the modern is against all forms of order, that it is subjective to the point of solipsism. It is desperately trapped inside a stream of consciousness, the state of stasis it inherited from Romanticism via symbolism. In the moderns, therefore, there is a conflict between Art and Society. Society offers some paradigmatic forms, which can be passively accepted. Art too offers forms; in the modern period these are generated from within. If the
ideal of the modernism is every man his own artist or artist of himself, its ideal is also every man the originator of his own forms. The danger for the individual who founds his life on art, on fictions, is of collapsing into a narcissistic passive privacy. A personal form which no one else can recognise or accept and which has no public validity, cannot really be called a form at all. If the quintessence of the Modern is its assertion of the value of the internal, then it risks denying the validity of the external.\textsuperscript{12}

These implications reduced the Modern novel to an elitist art form, preoccupied as the Modern

\textsuperscript{12} Stephen's decision toward the end of \textit{A Portrait} serves as the best example of this assertion: "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using . . . Silence, exile and cunning" or "O' life I go to encounter for the millioneth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race": (pp.247 and 252), in James Joyce, \textit{A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man} (London: Penguin Books, 1960).
n Venit was with forging a personal culture and vision which in effect, made the novel much more difficult and complex and divorced it from throbbing life of the common man.

Margaret Drabble is in revolt against these implications of 'modernism' and their exaltation and veneration by some critics and readers who believe that the anti-social Modern period was heroic and therefore, the social post-Modern period represents a loss of creative nerve. When she started her writing career in the early 1960's, she was burdened with her inherited contexts of modernism and postmodernism. But because of her different views on art and life and their mutual relationship, she found herself more in tune with the Great Tradition identified and popularised by F.R. Leavis; moral, liberal and English, as against Roland Barthes's theory of the novel which castigates the old social novel as the regressive, bourgeois genre whose very nature prevents it, from his point of view, from having any human, experiential relevance. To Drabble, ostensibly, the anti-social Modern period represents
a scabrous interruption of the tradition of English literature which she, along with few other post-Modern writers, is attempting to overcome. For, if one believes in the 'social' character of the Novel, then it is one of the most important forms of literature working to preserve the very fabric of civilized human existence. Drabble seems to be more in tune with the great Modern, W.B.Yeat's sensibility. She achieves a sort of unity of being through a creative exploration of relationships of a whole kind. It is possible to see it as both personal and social, the practical learning of extending relationships. As Raymond Williams would have us believe that it is possible to assert the value of society without opposing 'a pair of irreconcilable monads'. "The truly creative effort of our time is the struggle for relationships ... Realism as embodied in the Great Tradition is a touch-stone in this. For it shows in detail, that vital inter-penetration, idea into feeling, person into community, change into settlement, which we need, as growing points, in our own divided time. In the highest
realism, society is seen in fundamentally personal terms, and persons through relationships, in fundamentally social terms.” What meets the eye in Drabble’s fiction is this ‘vital interpenetration where integration is present and yet it is not achieved by an act of will but through a creative discovery appropriate to the substance and structure of the realist novel. It reaches its climax in her later fiction where the self is presented as “part of the interdependent network of the community rather than as an individual unit.” While doing so, she exhibits an awareness of the Modern dilemma and the implications of other allied twentieth century ideologies. In fact, her implicit reaction against both modernism and postmodernism and her belief in the possibility of representing the irreducible and recognizable real in the post-Freudian, Post-Darwinian, post-Sattrean and decentred world, makes her fiction distinct from them as well as from the Victorian Novel. It is rather a working back to a reconstructed realism in which Drabble begins with

modernism and subjects it to a sustained critique not only in terms of shattering the solipsistic enclosures of her protagonists with the force of their own experiences, but also by engaging in a metafictional dialogue (a legacy of her present context) in most of her novels to point to the shortcomings of the rigorous modernist aestheticism and its vision of life and art.

The early novels stress too much on the recognizableness of the unignorable real world and the individual's vital connection to it not through a simple representation of it in the manner of the Victorian novelist; the world of her novels is not given, it gradually comes into existence by the protagonists' own discovery of the outer world. If some critics and reviewers have not been quick to realise this and have consequently dubbed her as an old-fashioned novelist, part of the reason lies in that public image of Drabble which appears to disclaim any pretence to serious "art" and to promise only a "good read." But why should Drabble herself encourage the promotion of this image as
she clearly has done by her recorded preference for the dying tradition. The answer can be detected in her tendency to poke fun at the "serious stuff" in her novels - a stuff which is not vitally linked to life because not based on human sympathy and understanding and takes one away from life into some frozen aesthetic 'well wrought Urn'. It appears that she has been willing to sacrifice some serious critical attention for something more important to her - the attention of a larger intelligent audience whom she wants to be affected by her work but who, not entirely without logic (having had the tough experience of reading Joycean sort of stuff) would yawn at the mention of the word "Art". The discouraging response of many readers to "Art" is partly the legacy of that modernist orthodoxy by which Drabble's novels have been found old-fashioned. Drabble displays Jamesian subtlety in concealing what she is actually doing - exploring and discovering the real world and not taking it for granted. Literature still means 'unreadable' to many people in a society whose response to the esoteric modernist masterpieces has
been to venerate them as museum pieces. "There
must be a lot of people like me", she has said
and the title 'artist' is something she evidently
renounces in order to reach those people through her
work.

However, there has been a revival of
experimentation in 1960's which carries the modernist
assumptions to extremes by totally rejecting the
conventional mimetic theory of art, linear plot and
traditional characterization, and by separating the
individual and society into mutually exclusive
categories. It takes as its subject matter the very
act of writing fiction and the difficulty of using
language to reflect a reality that in itself may be
unknowable. By dissolving the dividing line between
fantasy and reality, the writers of this movement
create a sort of super reality which, in effect, is
an extension of autotelic theory of art popularized
by the new critics and derived from certain aspects
of modernist aesthetic. It calls attention to an
altered relationship between the artist, the work
and the audience. The postmodern novelist of this kind no longer tries to provide a convincing illusion of reality.

He forces his readers to realise that what they are experiencing is an artifice and involves them in the very process of artistic making. Such fiction, John Barthes claims, sees a new connection between art and life:

It is a kind of true representation of the distortion we all make in life. It is a representation of a distortion not a representation of life itself, but a representation of a representation of life... art is artifice after all.

The implications of this movement are that all knowledge is fictive, that living itself is a process of creating inevitably distorted versions of reality, that the complete description of any physical event is impossible, not because of the complexity of the event but because consciousness itself alters the event from its "true" form into an impossible maze of self-reflexiveness; that language does not represent a reality which is 'out there' but interprets...

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it, or more appropriately creates its own
new reality as reality simply does not exist; that
reality, history and "truth" are made, or invented;
that appearances are everything, that forms are
actually substance, that creative writing, is the
art of subordinating facts to the imagination,and
that objectivity is an impossible illusion. The
aim of this fiction, is to dis-establish dogmatic
confidence in the nature of reality. The author
is a dictator or a god who invents the characters
and can dress or undress them but need not be bound
by any anatomical reality.

David Lodge in his book The Modes of Modern
Writing (1977), provides a clear brief account of the
stages of modernist writing. He calls Beckett and
writers who broke away from Joyce and Proust in the
1940's and 1950's 'postmodernist' and a subsequent
group of innovators in the 1960's and 1970's he calls
'new postmodernists'. They include John Barthes,
Thomas Pynchon and John Hawkes in America, and John
Powles and Muriel Spark in Britain. Obviously the
history of fiction since James and Hardy is not one
of steady departure from their sort of novel or from what Lawrence called, while writing *The Rainbow*, 'the old stable ego of character.' But Graham Greene's distinction that "with the death of James the religious sense was lost to the English novel, and with the religious sense went the sense of the importance of the human act" holds for the broad difference between Victorian and Modern novels. Iris Murdoch has talked about this cleavage in a well-known essay, 'Against Dryness' (1961). She says that we no longer visualise man against a background of values, of realities that transcend him. And she goes on to stress that the nineteenth century sense of real people is what the modern writer should aim at, Elsewhere she has pointed to the vanishing of the philosophical self together with the filling in of the scientific self in the present century which has weakened moral thinking (and the novel). She, therefore, argues the need to discover a new moral philosophy in her philosophical writing. While

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pointing out how we have lost touch with the traditional purposes of the novel, she emphasises the need to renew and recover them. This is the position of many English writers today, and Drabble seems to be in the vanguard of this rediscovery and renewal. The influence of the American and the French experimentation mainly through Roland Barthes' untiring efforts to disentangle the novel from commonsense, to free it from all past conventions and traditional purposes have weakened confidence in the moral sense and in the novel. According to Barthes, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Michel Butor, authors of the French new novel, have produced the correct fiction for today, where the reader must reconstruct everything in his own imagination.17 Barthes' impact in England in 1960's & 1970's added to the challenge of American experiments in making today's serious novelist aware of the two issues of central relevance to English fiction: its relation with tradition and its relation with 'mimesis' (or realism).

Drabble, while taking cognizance of the implications of postmodernism by making the meta-fictional discourse part of her subject matter, which demystifies the narrative politics of mimetic art, and reveals to her the questionable validity of all knowledge, history, and the fictionality of fictional worlds, does not take refuge in the ivory tower of Joycean art or Barthesian postmodernism. She still takes a 'mimetic leap of faith' by reflecting and creating a recognizable world which we all inhabit in spite of our private prisons of consciousness which tend to denounce the outer world as unreal. She attempts to go beyond both modernism and postmodernism in spite of taking something from both in terms of technique and subject matter. The novel which thus asserts the reality and referentiality of language or the recognizableness of the unignorable real world, is not an outmoded form but a new vibrant form as its objective is to bring back the artist closer to the audience. Drabble implicitly attacks modernism and postmodernism for their elitist preoccupation with artistic truths, meanings and tastes of a minority at the cost of ignoring
the larger audience. She attempts to effect a concord between what is 'in here' with what is 'out there' in the staple of her narratives. In this sense she is post post—modern. She recognises the great change that has taken place in the world, especially in relation to women about whom she writes, which has consequently changed the form and structure of her novels corresponding to the reader's own changing structures of perception. But she has done so with a degree of linguistic and structural community — which she shares with other women novelists like Lessing and Murdoch and which is alien to the fiction written in the modernist and postmodernist modes. She discovers herself and the world by plodding her way through the whole depersonalised culture of the modern times.

If the central assertion of both modern and post modern literature is, in the words of Alan Kennedy, "I exist, whether or not God exists" or "I exist in spite of God and in defiance of society," then, for these writers, 'self' is 'sui generis' and
to be discovered by looking inward. Drabble shows in her fiction the untenability of this notion. On the contrary she shows how the self is fortified and authenticated by a continued truck between inner and outer reality. If modernist literature derived a sense of self from the inward gaze, Drabble shows the short livedness of the inwardly realised self, which because it is simply willed and not in tune with nature, is bound to die its own death. This idea is most expressly put forth in *A Summer Bird-Cage* and explored in the subsequent novels. It is the constant interplay between personal and non-personal, between the public self and the self discovered by introspection that gives the self its solidity of specification.

The twentieth century novel, on the whole, is post theological and Drabble, in spite of believing in some kind of underlying order, does not have Hopkins' confidence that there is a creator

who is the ground of being. Her beliefs allow scepticism and faith to co-exist; once accepted, it could be left almost out of sight - working as a safety net against despair. It helps her to explore the relationship between accident and plan in making or unmaking human destinies and in exploring a vital link that connects all the separate and apparently discrete beings and happenings into a unified web. Her faith in humanity enables her to see that the self is not only capable of externalization, of playing and creating new roles for itself but of galvanizing and re-invigorating the traditional ones - those of mother, father, husband and wife not through one's passive resignation to them but through a creative discovery of the necessity of these roles. The severance of the self from the community and the consequent relapse into an enclosure is not only self-defeating but carries within it the germs of the disintegration and dissolution of the community. In emphasizing the way in which fictions do relate to our lives amid other human beings, Drabble takes a leap forward among contemporary women novelists. The implication of such a move
is that the self can freely make fictions, without violating the integrity of others and that it is necessary to make fictions if we are to live as free and full individuals. This concern with the individual and his relation to the community assures her a place in the great tradition of the English Novel.

Drabble has herself thematized her anxiety of claiming a place in the Great Tradition and her fiction's relation to mimesis in her recent novel, The Radiant Way, through a metafictional discourse. She has tried to represent contemporary British society as the culmination of an ideological and intellectual history that has been inscribed in and supported by the dominant nineteenth century novelistic tradition of individualism. She presents her critique of English society and its intersection with the English Novel thematically, through the portrayal of a well educated, liberal, highly literate professional elite whose "great social dream" "of the brave new world" of "welfare state and country scholar-
ships^19 has failed them. Formally the critique appears in the form of a fractured narrative and intertextuality. Drabble's characters include various writers and teachers of English literature as she pursues the anxiety-laden task of redefining the form and ideology of the English novelistic tradition in order to accurately represent late twentieth century experience and reality. The range of allusion indicates the centrality of literature to Drabble's characters and the intensification of her struggle "to find the true story." She also explores the impact of reading the fiction included in the Great Tradition on the contemporary English society.

The profusion of allusion in The Radiant Way, also signals Drabble's central preoccupation with the questionable validity of narrative art and its fictive orders. In its acute self-reflexiveness, the novel is highly problematic, burdened by the

tension between Drabble's postmodernist self-awareness and desire to claim her place in the Great Tradition of the English novel. The resultant work of art appears by conventional standards, to be episodic, lacking in narrative. It weaves together the isolated chunks of traditional plots into an alternative narrative structure, a contemporary variation of the "narrative of community." In place of the deconstructed linear plots of the Great Tradition, Drabble offers us a metaplot of relatedness, explored, most fully, through the three protagonists and the new story of their friendship, but operating as a central structural principle throughout the novel. Alix, one of the three protagonists, has been educated "by her reading" to see her life as the plot of the nineteenth century novel and "to believe in the individual self, the individual soul [but] as she grew older, she increasingly questioned these concepts: seeing people perhaps more as flickering impermanent points of light, irradiating stretches, intersections, threads of a vast web, a vast network, which was humanity itself" (pp. 72-73).
She speaks here for Drabble's own gradual evolution of consciousness from the early novels where she uses single protagonists to *The Radiant Way* where those plots are not adequate to posit her sense of experience or her vision of life. Synchrony and the 'spatialization of narrative,'\textsuperscript{20} as opposed to linear temporal sequencing, are repeatedly used as techniques in *The Radiant Way* to resist causality as the main driving force of the narrative. By diffusing, decentring and fragmenting her characters' life stories, Drabble resists the ideologies inscribed in what could have been constructed as stories of falling in love, or out of love, or marrying and divorcing, or stories of education, growth, and success or failure.

While fashioning a narrative which resists nineteenth century patterns, Drabble engages in a sustained intertextual dialogue with her precursors

\textsuperscript{20} Mary Lay, "The Temporal Ordering in the Fiction of Margaret Drabble", *Critique*, 24,3 (1980), 73-84. Mary Lay was the first one to point to the use of 'spatialization' as technique in Drabble's fiction.
particularly Jane Austen. This metafictional comparison of Drabble's work with the Great Tradition betrays an uneasy postmodernist concern with the politics of story-telling. Drabble's debate with Austen is ideological and explicit. She represents for Drabble the novel's historical tendency to represent an elite world to an elite audience, and she declares her own antithetical stance thus:

"Liz, Alix and Esther were not princesses. They were not beautiful, they were not rich". (p.88)

Her decision to replace the Austen princess with not just one but three counter-protagonists signals a yet more fundamental challenge to the nineteenth century novel and its underlying ideology. Austen is a representative example of the dominant concern with individualized consciousness in the nineteenth century literature, a concern which has been eulogized by much twentieth century criticism and canon-making. Leavis, who is mentioned as a
central signifier in the novel, exalts Austen, among others, in the canon of his Great Tradition because she is among those writers who represent according to Drabble the highly conscious individual.

To be brief, The Radiant Way, by employing three parallel protagonists and numerous other points of view, by repeatedly resisting traditional linear plot development and narrative teleology, by breaking up fictional illusion with the voice of an intrusive narrator, and by the extensive allusion and intertextuality, problematises the most basic tenets of Leavis' tradition and its underlying assumptions about reality.

This metafictional discourse engages readers in the same kind of speculations and questions about the relationship between fiction and reality as are posed by Drabble in her "Mimesis" lecture. The reader is challenged to compare The Radiant Way, labelled by the intrusive narrator "this non-story, this non-sequence of non-events" (p.301), with the array of other novels alluded to in the text, and to
ask himself which forms, which plots, which stories come closer to representing the realities of our lives, if indeed any fictions can tell the truth.

Such awareness can lead a writer, like Drabble, who believes in the possibility of representing reality, to a state of near paralysis and bring her closer to Roland Barthes' theory of the novel. What saves the novel from being open to endless interpretations is her effective shifting of emphasis away from the fragmented individual stories to a narrative of community, which quietly challenges the ideological implications of focusing on "the individual self, the individual soul" in works by Austen and other nineteenth-century novelists — Dickens, Eliot and Hardy, and her own earlier fiction. The teleological momentum of individual stories is displaced by "collective, socio-political forces." 21

21 Pamela Bromberg, "Margaret Drabble's The Radiant Way: Feminist Metafiction", *Novel*, 24 (1990), 5-25. I am indebted to Bromberg for this analysis and yet I fundamentally differ from her premise and from her conclusions.
This is a critical step in Drabble's fictional career from narratives of the "individual self" to the more comprehensive vision of a "vast network, which was humanity itself" (pp. 72-73).

There is a key passage in the novel that reflects the broadening vision of the individual self:

> We are all part of a whole which has its own, its distinct, its other meaning: we are not ourselves, we are crossroads, meeting places, points on a curve, we cannot exist independently for we are nothing but signs, conjunctions, aggregations.

(p. 73).

These crucial lines also reflect Drabble's own evolved consciousness from that early phase where she could concentrate on the presentation of the individual consciousness exclusively. In the later phase, because of her broadened vision, the individual, of necessity, pales into insignificance. It is Drabble's faith in the possibility of reflecting and creating reality in the decentred, fast changing world, her 'vital capacity for experience', her moral preoccupation,
'her reverent openness before life', her moral courage to 'speak for life and growth' in the midst of 'destruction and disintegration', her profound interest in the vast network of interdependences of humanity that guarantee her a place in the Great Tradition in spite of the fact that she leaps out of its narrow 'vestments'. It is her honesty and earnestness to truly represent postmodern reality that makes her question and break the old conventions of plot and characterisation. To demonstrate how those straight-jackets are 'ill-fitting' for the presentation of the elusive and shifting nature of reality, is the import of experimentation in The Radiant Way.


23 Quoted from The Letters of D.H.Lawrence in The Great Tradition, p.18.